

The Matrix – Revolutions

The Matrix trilogy is so named for a reason: The most compelling aspect of the movies is what happens--or doesn't happen, or seems to happen--in that way-cool, computer-generated space. Unfortunately, in *Revolutions*, the characters spend even less time in that titular construction than they did in *Reloaded*, and the result is a far less interesting, less mind-bending movie than the original.

STORY

When *Revolutions* opens, Neo (Keanu Reeves) is in an unfamiliar train station, a "nowhere" between Zion and the Matrix. It looks like we're in for a brand-new head trip--a pretty cool one--and the first act of *Revolutions* is every bit as good as *The Matrix*, perhaps because it makes so many allusions to that film: We revisit the Oracle's kitchen (albeit with a new Oracle in Mary Alice), where she's baking cookies for a little girl, chain smoking and handing out prophesy. She and Neo lay out the plot for the trilogy's conclusion as concisely as two people speaking in riddles can manage: The Architect (whom we don't see until the end of the movie), is trying to "balance the equation" created by Neo (who is a programmatic anomaly). As a result, Agent Smith's (Hugo Weaving) power and number are growing exponentially, both within the Matrix and--if you recall the conclusion of *Reloaded*--inside Zion. To save the last human city, the Oracle will have to make some sacrifices, and Neo will have to "return to the source"--the Machine City where it all began.

ACTING

The trouble comes for *Revolutions* when Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) and Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) pull Neo from the Matrix and return with him to Niobe's hovercraft. From there, the movie largely abandons the four main characters as Trinity and Neo leave in one ship for Machine City, while Morpheus and Niobe (Jada Pinkett Smith) leave in another for Zion, where the last stand against the machines is beginning. This leaves *us* with exactly *zero* characters we care anything about during the ensuing way-too-long siege of Zion, which results in about *zero* emotional investment for a good three-fifths of the movie. There's more action than acting in these interminable battle scenes, and many of the new minor Zionites seem custom-created for heroic death scenes. The dorky Transformer-like APUs (Armored Personal Units) don't help, and watching more swarming sentinels than you can shake a machine gun at gets old after awhile.

DIRECTION

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It may be metaphysically necessary for writers/directors/producers Andy and Larry Wachowski that Zion be less cool than the Matrix. Grim reality is rarely as entertaining as fantasy, and that's probably the point. Like in a world defined by Thomas Hobbes, the events in Zion are nasty and brutish, but they are not, regrettably, short. By the time we finally make it back into the Matrix for the final duel between Agent Smith and Neo--the showdown that could bring peace to the planet and end the revolution forever--we've lost the thread. Why are we here again? Oh, right. Love. Yes, love. Neo so loved the world and all that...and because "everything that has a beginning has an end." The question is, how does one end a trilogy when the whole thing's been based around the idea that nothing is what it seems? Audiences likely expect the kind of conclusion that lets you draw your *own* conclusions based on your experience of all that's gone before. Unfortunately, that's not what *Revolutions* delivers. Instead, what begins well ends so predictably that it's hard to believe it came from the minds that created the Matrix franchise. Maybe that's the Wachowskis' idea of a twist.

BOTTOM LINE

Revolutions is more action flick than either of its predecessors. While that may spell big box office, it doesn't spell long-term staying power, and of the three films in *The Matrix* trilogy, the final installment may well go down as the biggest disappointment of them all.

LOVE ACTUALLY

Love Actually, the latest film from Richard Curtis, sounded to me like a thoroughly cheesy and slushy affair. However, after several mates had seen it and all had said it touched them in some way that was relevant to their own lives, I agreed to join a party from work at the pictures. Some said it was hilariously funny, some that it made them cry, others that it was just a good old enjoyable feel good flick. Hence I didn't really know what to expect, which I've found it often the best way to approach things.

MULTIPLE STORIES

Love Actually is made up of several stories, concerning several couples, most of whom are in some way intertwined, be it by blood, romantic love, work, marriage, friendship, obligation, or just good old sex.

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We have the newly elected Prime Minister and the down-to-earth Downing Street tea girl who sets his heart racing. We have the bereaved stepfather, Daniel, who finds himself responsible for her 10 year old son, and we have Karen, the Prime Minister's sister and Daniel's close mate, and her straying husband, Harry.

We also have writer Jamie who takes off to France after finding his girlfriend sleeping with his brother, and his Portuguese housekeeper, Aurelia, at his house in France. We have Jamie's friend Pete who is marrying the beautiful Juliet, who is in turn secretly adored by Pete's best mate, Mark.

Then there is Colin, who has no luck with women in Britain and decides to take off to America to get some rumpy pumpy, and we have John, an actor in soft-porn movies who finds himself falling for his co-star. And lastly – I think! – we have Sarah, who works for Harry and is in love with her colleague Karl, but whose life is devoted to her brother who has a serious mental illness. Erm, no not lastly, actually, as I've just remembered has-been rock star Billy Mack and his faithful manager Joe.

Confused? It certainly sounds confusing, but one of the joys of this film is that while watching it you are not confused at all. In fact, this plethora of stories-within-stories-within-stories produces a well-paced movie containing something for everyone and giving us a very wide view of what love and relationships entail.

Some relationships are painful to watch, like Karen and Harry's, some are extremely touching, like Daniel and his stepson's. Others, particularly John the soft porn-star's, are hilarious, and yet others, such as the Prime Minister and the tea girl, are downright implausible but none the worse for it.

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PERFORMANCES

Performances throughout are excellent, with my honours going to Bill Nighy for hamming it up stupendously, Liam Neeson for being believable, likeable and moving, Emma Thompson for taking a mundane part and making us feel for her character, Martine McCutcheon for being utterly charming, Andrew Lincoln for oozing unrequited love, and Martin Freeman for making me laugh even more than he did in *The Office*.

My only criticism is that Hugh Grant just didn't portray the necessary confidence and stature of a Prime Minister. He was his usual affable English self and did make me laugh several times, so his performance in no way spoilt the film. In fact Curtis himself as the writer was just as responsible as Hugh for making the part rather stuttering and lame.

Love Actually is Curtis's third film as writer (the others being *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Notting Hill*), and his first as director. And a very good job he makes of his directorial debut too.

Curtis cuts between scenes frequently, which for me produced two main effects. First, we get to understand the intertwining lives of many of the characters, and second, we never have time to get bored for a second. Transitions between scenes are superb too, sometimes jolting, thus adding to the comedic or sad effects, and at other times absolutely seamless, such as when he uses the same piece of music in two separate but adjoining stories.

Of all the stories, the one about Daniel and his stepson, Sam, is the most pivotal. While Daniel grieves for his lost wife, Sam both grieves for his lost mother and suffers the pain of being in love for the first time, and with a girl he believes doesn't know he's alive. At first this drives the two males apart, but as the film progresses Sam's despair becomes a bonding for them both, an opportunity for Daniel to open up and live again, and a chance for Sam to learn early in life the value of openness, willingness and love. Though undeniably manipulative when it comes to our sentimental side, it is a story of hope that couldn't fail to touch even the hardest heart

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I also particularly enjoyed the story between Jamie and Aurelia, which shows that love can transcend even language barriers, and the disintegrating marriage of Harry and Karen who have taken each other for granted and ailed to keep love alive under the pressures of work and family life.

SUMMARY

Love Actually deals with many different forms of love and many different stages of love. If viewed as a chronological tale, with the first flush of love being Sam's story and the last being that of Karen and Harry, it presents a pretty pessimistic picture. However, I don't think that's what Curtis intended at all – if so, he would have made the structure more chronological too – and don't advise anyone to watch the film from that perspective. If you do, you will miss out on all the wonderfully funny and touching moments and what I see as the overall theme of the film – hope.

Love Actually is not a 'great film' in the timeless tradition of 'great films', but it didn't mean to be and doesn't need to be.

Love Actually is an emotional big-dipper of a movie which has you leaving the cinema having thoroughly enjoyed yourself, feeling full of optimism and wanting to tell someone that you adore them.

A great film for any time, but especially for Christmas. Highly recommended.

On general release now, certificate 15, running time 2 hours 15 minutes (though it will seem to pass by in a flash).

THE LORD OF THE RINGS – THE RETURN OF THE KING

One "Ring" – finally – rules them all.

In "The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King," a great mythic movie cycle gets the ending it deserves – and we can finally see this stunningly completed film trilogy for what it is: one of the major achievements of film history.

VISIONS

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This is a movie that, purely and simply, has visions and excitement to blow us away once again. "The Return of the King" and the massive 10-hour complete film that it now concludes become together a supreme adventure fantasy epic, a staggering triumph, a movie to delight all ages, tastes and sexes – including that small part of the audience who still feel heroic fantasy with cute little hobbits, ornate language and bizarre supernatural beings is just not their cup of tea.

Sweeping us along on a vast cinematic landscape strewn with wonders – with elves and wizards, dwarves, knights and great mythological monsters – the picture drenches us in spectacles and marvels once again. Blasted and shaken by great blazing action scenes and then becalmed by a graceful, homeward journey and resolution, Peter Jackson's magnificent film of the J.R.R. Tolkien novels comes to a conclusion both profoundly moving and deeply satisfying.

Everything ends here: primarily Frodo Baggins' (Elijah Wood) quest to destroy the dangerous and magical ring of invisibility with the aid of good wizard Gandalf (Ian McKellen) and the rest of their hardy fellowship – that stout band encompassing gruff-and-ready dwarf Gimli (John Rhys-Davies), sureshot elf Legolas (Orlando Bloom) and faithful hobbits Sam Gamgee (Sean Astin), Pippin (Billy Boyd) and Merry (Dominic Monaghan).

But also concluded, with stunning panache and entrancing detail, are the annihilating wars in Middle Earth between the dark forces and wizards of Mordor, Sauron and Saruman and the embattled peoples of Rohan and Gondor. Resolved also are the furious quest of the wild, schizophrenic Gollum/Smeagol (Andy Serkis) to steal back the ring before it can be cast into flames, the ascension to kingship of the heroic adventurer Aragorn (Viggo Mortensen) and the final return home of the hobbits and the sunset coda for Frodo and his once-heroic cousin Bilbo (Ian Holm).

And even though the "Rings" trilogy is, in many ways, a quintessential bright boy's tale, the "Ring" women, befitting modern post-feminist times, share in the glories. The movie's heroines remain beautiful and brave to the end – Aragorn's elfin ladylove Arwen (Liv Tyler), indomitable elf queen Galadriel (Cate Blanchett) and sturdy human Eowyn (Miranda Otto), the king's niece of Rohan, earn a grand salute as well.

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Again, Jackson, as before, has not skimped, working with his splendid team in those immense New Zealand landscapes to give us as much of Tolkien's vision as any filmmaker reasonably could. Yet "The Return of the King," almost 3½ three and a half hours in length, passes by like a windstorm, some onrushing dark torrent of violence and terror, followed by final enveloping sunshine. Though it's full of violence and grotesquerie – the marauding giant spider that attacks Frodo in a web-strewn cavern, the hideous army of melting-faced Orcs, and those climactic battles that resemble nightmarish exploding menageries with huge mastodons elephants, great-winged beasts and charging horses – it has a liberating wit and imagination.

In the novel trilogy, written mostly during World War II and the immediate post-war era, J.R.R. Tolkien created a modern myth spun to some degree from the horrors of the Nazi invasion of Europe and the blitz of London. Jackson has universalized that myth and brilliantly visualized and cinematically translated it, giving given it operatic grandeur and sublime imagination.

THE CHARACTERS

All of the characters register strongly, but three stand above the rest. Astin's Sam is a model of devotion. McKellen's Gandalf gives the movie even more gravitas, stature and believable nobility than Alec Guinness leant to the first "Star Wars." With his hawklike, kingly features and weathered wizard's mien, McKellen, yet another well-deserving aristocrat of British acting, seems a perfect Gandalf, a figure of near-Shakespearean visual eloquence. (with even aquasi-Shakespearean speech or two).

But the character who steals the picture, as he also did in did the movie "Two Towers" and the books, (but not the ring), is the Gollum, the skeletal, two-faced, relentless little being from whom Bilbo first stole the ring. Created by the actor Andy Serkis and the film's digital wizards, Gollum becomes the tale's most memorable figure: a symbol of the evil and ravaging appetite to which wealth and power (and especially the ring's transcendent gifts) can reduce us all. With his sibilant hiss of "Precious! Precious!" Serkis' Gollum becomes a warning. Heroes may prevail, but riches and power corrupt – and everyone in the film, including Frodo, has always been at risk.

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One figure is controversially absent, the evil wizard Saruman, played by ace villain Christopher Lee, whose last seven-minute scene in "Towers" was kept for this film and then cut, and whose last scene in the book "King" was never scripted or filmed. It's an unfortunate absence, though we'll see that deleted scene, as always, in the collectors' DVD. In the end, AN EPIC.

"The Lord of the Rings" in total is one of the screen's most convincingly majestic epics. But it's also playful, a warm adventure, packed with emotion, tenderness and awe. I loved the first two episodes of the movie Ring cycle because they summoned up not just the literary traditions Tolkien mines so brilliantly, but because they shine out like some great summation of all the movie adventure classics we treasure in youth. When I left "King" finally, it was with real regret, finally ejected from a world I was loathe to lose. Like all great fantasies and epics, this one leaves you with the sense that its wonders are real, its dreams are palpable.

And now, through Jackson and his company – the movie's Frodo, Gandalf, Aragorn, Galadriel, Gollum and all the rest – they are. And will be, always.

FILM DETAILS

Directed by Peter Jackson; written by Frances Walsh, Philippa Boyens, Jackson, based on the novel by J. R. R. Tolkien; photographed by Andrew Lesnie; edited by Jamie Selkirk; production designed by Grant Major; music by Howard Shore; produced by Jackson, Barrie M. Osborne, Walsh. A New Line release; opens Wednesday. Running time: 3:21. MPAA rating: PG-13 (For intense epic battle scenes and frightening images). Frodo Baggins.....Elijah Wood Gandalf the Wizard.....Ian McKellen Aragorn.....Viggo Mortensen Arwen.....Liv Tyler Galadriel.....Cate Blanchett Sam.....Sean Astin Boromir.....Sean Bean Bilbo Baggins.....Ian Holm Elrond.....Hugo Weaving Gimli.....John Rhys-Davies King Theoden of Rohan.....Bernard Hill.